

# Boeckh, Orozco receive 2nd Oliver Press Award for Extraordinary Mentorship

Faculty members recognized with honor named for renowned scientist-mentor

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The two 2021-2023 honorees of the Oliver Press Award for Extraordinary Mentorship are Dr. Michael Boeckh, left, professor in the Vaccine and Infectious Disease and Clinical Research divisions and head of VIDD's Infectious Disease Sciences Program, and Dr. Johnnie Orozco, assistant professor in Clinical Research.

*Photos by Robert Hood / Fred Hutch News Service*

Earlier this month, Drs. Johnnie Orozco and Michael Boeckh received the 2021-2023 Oliver Press Award for Extraordinary Mentorship. The honor is given to those at the Hutch who, like **the late Fred Hutch physician-scientist and leader**, show dedication and excellence in mentorship. Recipients are expected to enrich mentorship across the center.

“These are people who are committed to seeing others flourish,” said Clinical Research Division faculty member and Press mentee Dr. Damian Green during a virtual Fred Hutch town hall on June 9 where the awardees were recognized. “And if I can channel Ollie for a second, I just say to Michael and Johnnie that your charge is to just do what you do — to advocate not only for your mentees, but for a system that continues to value mentorship, despite all the other demands imposed by working at an academic medical center.”

**Orozco** and **Boeckh** are the second set of Press Award winners, following **Dr. Beverly Torok-Storb in 2018**. Competition was stiff, with 56 nominations in support of 21 candidates.

After the award announcement at the town hall, Green and Fred Hutch President and Director Dr. Tom Lynch led the honorees in a discussion about mentorship.

## Fred Hutch virtual town hall - June 9, 2021



A discussion with the two Press Award honorees at the June 9, 2021, town hall

### Advocating for underrepresented minorities

Orozco, who is Latino, grew up in an immigrant household attending under-resourced schools in a neighborhood threatened by gang violence and drugs. Just as mentorship helped him arrive where he is today, he now strives to help others to pursue their own goals.

People with backgrounds like his don't have family members or friends in academia to ask for advice, or to serve as professional role models, he explained. They may be culturally disinclined to tout individual achievements, as they must for successful applications to training programs and jobs in competitive academic or medical fields. And they can find it difficult to approach an accomplished individual to ask for a research opportunity, for example — but that burden is lessened when that individual happens to look like them. Thus, the mentorship of someone like Orozco can be immensely powerful.

"If you can't see it, you can't be it," Orozco said.

His current activities include chairing the UW School of Medicine Committee on Minority Faculty Advancement, participating in career panels, welcoming undergraduates to learn and work in his lab, and providing informal mentoring to students and postdocs who are working to define and reach their next goals.

"The reason I want to see more representation is that I need help in having a say in setting up the research agenda that needs to be more equitable," he said.

In that way, he's not only a mentor, he's an advocate, said one colleague who nominated him for the award.

“Dr. Orozco has made contributions to future scientists of all ages, training high school students in his laboratory, mentoring trainees in our hematology and oncology fellowship program and serving on countless committees and programs designed to increase opportunity,” the nominator wrote. “He is not only a role model for people across the spectrum of underrepresented backgrounds who wish to pursue a career in science and medicine, he also advocates for them.”

## The joy of mentorship

Boeckh said that it brings him joy to share what he’s learned to help mentees find their own paths forward. It’s something he’s focused on since early in his career and continues now with the benefit of the perspectives he’s gained in his current leadership roles.

Over the years he’s mentored about 40 pre- and postdoctoral researchers, plus many more people at other educational and career levels in more time-limited capacities. He leads the Hutch’s infectious disease training grant, which provides training to early career clinical researchers in infectious disease. He’s proud that many of his mentees have gained coveted academic career advancement [“K”] grants from the National Institutes of Health and that so many have found successful careers in government, industry and academia — including on the Fred Hutch faculty.

“I see my role as helping trainees discover their passion for a particular area of research and pursue a scientific career at the highest level of excellence and integrity,” he said.

The priority he places on mentorship comes through, said a former trainee who nominated Boeckh for the award.

“Michael sees his role as a mentor to be his most important priority — to train the next generation of scientists and researchers,” the nominator wrote. “As a senior leader, he remains approachable, humble, honest and patient, skills which make him uniquely skilled as a mentor. My success is a direct outcome of his support, and my approach to mentorship a reflection of his leadership.”

## From mentee to mentor

Both awardees thanked their own mentors for helping them get to where they are, and for teaching them what it means to be a good mentor.

“I would not have received this award without my mentors, namely **Joel Meyers** [the first head of the Fred Hutch Infectious Disease Program, who died in 1991], Raleigh Bowden and **Larry Corey**, who were inspiring role models as scientists, leaders and mentors,” Boeckh said. “What I learned from them is to expect scientific rigor and excellence, and that guiding trainees into early independence and success is gratifying and a reflection of success of the mentorship.”

As an early career scientist, Orozco was mentored by Press himself, from whom he learned how to support mentees as individuals with unique needs and goals, and how to communicate clearly, especially when giving advice. In addition to Press’ guidance, Orozco said that he has benefited from mentorship at every stage of

his scientific education and training.

“I was not supposed to end up here,” Orozco said. “It’s a testament to the power of mentoring. Despite my less-than-stellar pedigree, amazing mentors saw something in me and were able to meet me where I was, and showed me what needed to happen so that I could get to the next step. ... I’ve benefited so much, that mentoring others to join this path is the least I can do.”

## QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?



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